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ABSTRACT

This paper contains remarks concerning the accomplishments and problems of the English-as-a-second-language program implemented at the Kalakaua Intermediate School in Hawaii for immigrant students as they enter a new, American culture. One of the greatest problems faced by the program is deciding which sections of regular classes the newly arrived students should enter to help them most in their process of acculturation. A discussion of the negative and positive results of placing these students in faster, regular classes is provided. The program evaluation advocates personal contact with the students, a continuation of the individualization of instruction through the use of tutors, and a constant review of materials, methods, and the general program. (VM)

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TESL: Antidote for Truancy?

by

Harvey M. Taylor

During the course of the 1970-71 school year, the author was a half-time TESL tutor at Kalakaua Intermediate School; the following are some informal observations which may be of help to others involved in TESL in Hawaii. The emphasis herein is on neither English teaching techniques nor theory but rather upon the problems of these immigrant students as they are confronted by a new, American culture.

The TESL situation at Kalakaua perhaps is unique in that most TESL students there are from a single language background (Ilocano); only a few are speakers of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, or Samoan. Although the TESL teacher, Mrs. Aleli Starosta, is from the Philippines and a native speaker of Tagalog, neither she nor any of her tutors could speak Ilocano. Communication, therefore, with most of the students was limited to English.

Most of the TESL students were assigned to the special TESL classes only two out of their six periods a day, with the "better" students being in TESL only one period. During their other four or five periods, they attended regular classes at their respective grade levels. One big initial problem was that of deciding which sections of the regular classes to assign these TESL students to.

For instance, if they were to be assigned to the "slowest" sections of social studies, science, English, etc., where there would be a better chance of their handling the English in the course work, their local classmates (who tended to be both academically slower and socially more prejudiced and defensive than other local students) usually persecuted the TESL (i.e., immigrant) students, who had not as yet grouped themselves for effective self-protection. Thus for social and emotional reasons, it was not advisable to assign TESL students to such sections.

An alternative would be to assign students to sections which were "average" or "fast", since there, their local-student classmates would be more self-confident and

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therefore seemed to have less personal need to assert themselves by picking on the TESL newcomers. However, the command of English necessary for a student to function with any measure of success in such sections was something the TESL students as yet did not have. They would therefore generally be unable to understand or communicate with either the teacher or other students. At least initially, they would be unable to do any of the course work.

One further alternative, followed in the past, would be to assign the TESL students solely to TESL classes until they were able to cope with regular classwork. This had proved unsatisfactory in almost every way -- the students were over-protected, never made friends with others outside their own ethnic or TESL groups, took no content subjects and therefore were forced to miss out on a full year's work in their content subjects, and had almost no English practice except with their TESL teacher.

Last fall the decision was made in conjunction with various of the DOE personnel, including the principal at Kalakaua, to place the TESL students in the less painful social situation of the faster, regular class sections, even if it meant frustration in their studies. TESL students at the intermediate school level appear to do most of their English language learning from their peers. This fact plus the very limited amount of TESL class time actually available to them indicate the inadvisability of isolating these students in a TESL "learning ghetto" away from their local peers; such isolation would destroy most of their initial opportunities for making friends.

What have the results been? Although pre- and post-testing have shown progress in most TESL students' ability to take TESL exams, no one as yet "knows" the complete picture. From classroom experience, certain language and non-language results can be observed, even without reference to test scores. It is hoped that these observations will produce fruitful discussions among both TESL and non-TESL teachers who contact these students. How much of [illegible] blame or credit for the results observed is due to [illegible] ESL program alone is unknown at this point.

Some of the non-TESL teachers at Kalakaua have raised reasonable questions regarding the TESL program; each such question seems to reflect the type of contacts

the teacher has had with TESL students. These questions ranged, for instance, from "Isn't student Y mentally retarded?" (from a teacher whose course involved a lot of English reading and the following of oral and written directions) to "Why don't you teach them the local cultural patterns in their own languages before you try to teach them English? They could then keep out of unnecessary fights." (from a counselor).

Negative Results

Most TESL students have done poor to failing work in practically all their non-TESL subjects (regardless of what actual grades they received). Notable exceptions have been in math and art, provided extensive English was not needed in order to do the work, follow directions, etc.

As report cards came out throughout the year, the TESL teachers were initially overly encouraged by the fact that some of their students were receiving grades of C or above in their non-TESL, non-math content subjects; this seemed to indicate that they were able to function at an average or above-average level in courses such as science, social studies, English, etc. However, informal contacts with some of the teachers who had given these grades revealed that they had actually been "given" -- they were gifts based not upon course-work achievement but rather upon regular attendance, acceptable classroom behavior, and a willingness to try. Thus, these favorable grades did not mean that the TESL students were able to do average or above-average work in such classes. Even their P.E. grades were poor --a reflection of their inability to comprehend explanations of games and their rules.

The one year of limited TESL training at Kalakaua has not enabled the majority of the immigrant children involved to function at even a minimally satisfactory English level in the normal classroom situation (they of course would compare more favorably with the slowest sections of local students in the same courses, but this level of achievement is unacceptable). Standardized tests taken during the year confirmed their inability to do normal work at their grade level.

Those TESL students who already had extensive English knowledge (and were therefore exempted from TESL

either when they enrolled in the fall or after half a year of TESL) have been able to function more satisfactorily in regular classes; the present TESL program may have best met the English needs of these almost-good-enough students.

Near the end of the school year many, if not most of the regular TESL students developed a defeatest attitude toward their non-TESL classes; more and more of them began to cut such classes, some of the showing up only for their TESL classes -- possibly the only class where they were able to perform well enough to receive teacher commendation and respect from fellow students. It was disheartening to the teachers to see this defeatist attitude gradually grow in even their TESL classes.

One method used to avoid this failure-feeling was to mark only correct answers (as correct) on all written work; the papers were promptly returned and the student was instructed to "fix up" the unmarked answers for grading. Every student thus eventually received an A+ on his written work, some of course getting their A+ sooner than others. This was a very satisfactory modification of the grading system. (The realities of report card grades still indicated to both the student and to others the relative ease in which these A+'s were received on the daily written work).

The need for protection from student hijackers (of lunch money), the desire for peer approval, the need for someone to talk to --these and other factors tended to cause the formation of loosely-knit "gangs" whose members were sometimes exclusively immigrants speaking a common language (in this case limited mostly to Ilocanos, probably because there was no other sizeable group of immigrant students at Kalakaua). These gangs then drew fire from the other already-established gangs. This additional social pressure on these particular TESL students resulted in truancy (partially for fear of being attacked on the way to and from school) and further isolation from the main stream of the local, non-gang students at school. Those who were old enough began to look for jobs and to plan to quit school. Neither their social studies nor TESL classes had been able to prepare them for life in this junior high school culture.

Finally, some students asked to stay in TESL another year for fear they would not be able to do their assignments in the classes which they would be taking in place of TESL. It was not that they saw their need for more English but rather that TESL gave them a shelter to return to each day after their repeated failures in possibly every other class during the day.

Positive Results

Part of the goal of the TESL program has been to help the students become acculturated during their year of TESL studies. All of the students have gone a certain distance in that direction. Those with certain kinds of parental encouragement and with few peers who spoke their native language generally managed to adopt many of the values necessary for their eventual acceptance into the school community.

Many students were able to learn some of what was necessary for them to be accepted by local students (Hawaiian "pidgin" and current slang, local customs and styles of dress, the value system of their peers, etc.). None of these things were specifically taught (nor could they have been taught adequately) to the students by the TESL or other teachers. Yet it is precisely these above things which the students needed to know in order to be socially accepted by other students. At times it seemed that their learning of standard English was serving to alienate them from other local junior high school students rather than to prepare them to become part of their school culture. The TESL (and other) teachers at least unconsciously attempted to teach these immigrant children what amounts to upper-middle class language, customs, and values.

Those students who learned these things from only their teachers without learning the parallel local systems in use by their peers were further isolated from that part of Hawaii's society that their Kalihi home addresses prescribed for them ("lower class", "deprived", "disadvantaged", etc.).

On the other hand, the more flexible students learned part of both systems -- the one to use with the teacher and the other to use in their local contacts. The less flexible learned only one, if any at all.

It is probably true that only those that will learn the middle class system will have much hope for financial success in the future here; yet their use of standard English immediately isolates them from their peers, which is perhaps of greater immediate importance. Standard English and "approved" values will give them the tools for financial advancement (and eventual escape from their neighborhood), yet these cut them off from any real chance for identification right now with their neighborhood peers. Are we right in prescribing this isolation for these students by that which we choose to teach them?

Without exception those students who were extremely quiet and withdrawn because of their inadequate English at their enrollment in the fall opened up to some extent during the year as their self-confidence in their English increased (this was not necessarily in proportion to their actual improvement in English ability). Without the TESL classes to give them an environment where they could succeed in English communication (the small TESL classes and the presence of the tutors allowed them to speak almost whenever they had anything to say), it is doubtful that there would have been such rapid and marked improvement. Most of the TESL students developed a new "American" personality, in some cases only remotely like their previous personality (not always an improvement, however, it seemed).

The students from Chinese, Korean and Japanese backgrounds as a whole did somewhat better in their general school work than those from Samoa (even though the Samoans initially had a big English advantage) and considerably better than those from the Philippines (again, in spite of the latter's more extensive previous English training). Social factors involving the home appear to be more significant than English ability alone in producing "good" students among the immigrant children. As has been noted for learning in general, student motivation appears to be of prime importance in both the TESL student's success in learning English and in his acculturation.

Conclusions

It appears that in the overall goal of preparing immigrant junior high school students for integration into the Hawaii public school system, the TESL program as implemented at Kalakaua Intermediate School has been of positive benefit; however, without the necessary

reinforcement from home, the program with only its limited time with the students and its primary emphasis upon building English proficiency cannot do more than "help those who help themselves." The others cannot be given sufficient attention and counseling to make school more attractive to them than are truancy and other types of anti-social behavior.

The fear has been expressed that these who are dropping out of school now will be trapped by their poor English and lack of education in an immigrant social ghetto, with crime alone able to offer them the prestige and money they want. Their contacts with their TESL teachers who show interest in them and whom they come to trust seem especially strategic, as these teachers may well represent the only members of the Honolulu "establishment" who genuinely accept these students. It will be a mistake if TESL teaching is ever limited purely to improving the English communication skills of these immigrant students. If year by year even a portion of the increasilgly larger group of young immigrants refuse American schooling because of repeated failure, not only will these eventually form part of the "hard core" of unemployables but very likely they will form a source of new trainees for those seeking help in criminal activities.

The solutions suggested here are for even more personal contact with these students, a continuation of the individualization of instruction through the use of tutors, and a constant review of the TESL materials, methods, and general program to be sure that they are relevant and meeting the needs of the students, not just the desires of the educational establishment.

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